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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study of a linguistics classroom produced insights into student perceptions of in-class speech that can contribute to the ongoing debate about the place of student participation in academic classrooms. The study was conducted in an elective undergraduate linguistics course at Michigan Technological University. Fifteen classroom sessions were observed, and out-of-class interviews were conducted with two female and two male students. The study followed the participant observation model. In the class studied, there were many opportunities for student speech, but a core of five to six students seemed to monopolize these opportunities. Student actions and attitudes, recorded by observation and interview, revealed four tacit rules for class participation: (1) do not ask stupid questions; (2) do not waste the teacher's time; (3) do not waste class time; and (4) try to find the answer before asking the teacher. Some students function under the assumption that only those with the most knowledge should speak, thus assuming a hierarchy of knowledge. Findings indicate a serious gap existing between student and teacher perceptions of the value of participation. Instructors should reserve time at the beginning of each term and throughout the term to explain the rationale behind student speech. (Two graphs indicating the breakdown of student speech in two separate class meetings are included.) (HB)

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Action and Inaction: Student and Teacher Roles in Classroom Participation

Lin Morgenstern

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Action and Inaction: Student and Teacher Roles in Classroom Participation

Lin Morgenstern

Introduction

How do college students view participation? Are teaching strategies that encourage in-class speech pedagogically sound? Or are they based on dreams of a student-owned classroom in a situation where the students are not qualified to pay the mortgage? Students, teachers, and researchers alike are divided on the benefits of student participation. Researchers such as Alton-Lee and Haberfield; Schultz, Florio, and Erikson; and Cazden have explored the structure and importance of student participation, while Nystrand and Gamoran advocate a pedagogical theory that values student speech. A recent ethnographic study of a linguistics classroom produced insights into student perceptions of in-class speech that can contribute to this debate about the place of student participation in academic classrooms. Many instructors value student speech in the classroom and it is important to hear what students themselves have to say about class participation. In this study, student actions and attitudes, recorded by observation and interview, revealed four tacit rules for class participation that merit serious consideration. The results of this study seemed to suggest that when it came to in-class speech some students functioned under the assumption that only those with the most knowledge should speak—an assumption that could prove significant for all instructors who value participation and use in-class speech to facilitate and evaluate learning.

The Setting

The study was conducted in an undergraduate linguistics course at Michigan Technological University, a university with an approximate undergraduate enrollment of 5,000 students, with the majority pursuing engineering degrees. The course was an elective that could be used to fulfill one of the university's humanity requirements and it focused more on what the professor termed 'information passing' and less on interpretation and discussion.
The class studied was comprised mainly of sophomores and juniors, but included one first-year student, four seniors, and two non-traditional students.

Much of the information about student perceptions of in-class speech to be presented today comes from out-of-class student interviews. Volunteers for these interviews were solicitated during the first week of the class. Two males and two females participated. These four students represented 12% of class enrollment, with one student coming from each academic grade level.

CS 507 862

Allicia, a Scientific and Technical Communications major, was a first-year student and seemed unsure of herself academically.

Betsy, a second year student also majoring in Scientific and Technical Communications, was self reflective and appeared anxious about her academic performance.

Carl, a third-year Liberal Arts major, seemed ambivalent about the importance of college—saying he was "here because you need a degree to get a good job."

Dan, a fourth year mechanical engineering major, was enthusiastic about his course of study and appeared very confident academically.

The interviews, focusing generally on the topic of in-class speech, touched upon student perceptions of how well class participation facilitated learning, and revealed student opinions about the usefulness of in-class speech. The interviewees reported their rules for participation in an undergraduate course at MTU and provided some answers to the following compelling question which became the focus of the study. What is the context of each individual's practical knowledge of how to interact and how does that knowledge get realized in face-to-face interaction?

Mary, the professor, had taught the same course the previous year. Professionally, Mary is a highly qualified linguist and teacher whose research interests include student and teacher roles in classroom participation. Given her background, Mary hoped to create an atmosphere where students would feel comfortable speaking.

The Study

The procedures of the study followed the participant observation model. A colleague, Kate Remlinger, and I both observed fifteen classroom sessions; four of these were audio recorded and transcribed, two were video taped and transcribed. In addition, I conducted four student interviews which were audio taped and transcribed. The collected data was then reduced to the information relating to the following generalizations by Courtney Cazden:

- Face-to-face interaction, between teacher and students and among students, is governed by context specific rules.
- Activities have participation structures, with rights and obligations for participation. . . Rules for participation are implicit, conveyed and learned through interaction itself. (434)

The preliminary findings, in addition to providing information about how the professor encouraged participation, helped in identifying tacit student rules for in-class speech. These findings can help inform all instructors who value class participation.

Speech Act

For the purposes of this study, a student speech act is defined as any student utterance directed at the teacher and/or the class as a whole. Included were questions, answers, and general comments. Not included were student comments meant to be heard only by neighboring students.

Statement of Goals

During the first interview with the professor, Mary articulated several course goals relating to student participation in the class. She said she wanted to

- Distribute the student responsibility for answering questions
- Engage the students and pique their curiosity about language
- Empower the students and encourage them to use their voice to claim their ownership of the class

During their interviews, the students articulated the following thoughts about verbal class participation:

Allicia: I need to get the courage to speak up. Being the only freshman [sic], I feel intimidated.

Betsy: I usually don't talk in class. I prefer talking one-on-one—after class or in her office.

Carl: I talk because Mary grades on participation. I want to say enough so she notices and gives me a good grade.

Dan: I talk in most of my other classes, but in this one I usually end up sitting in the back. . . I can't say as much. That's okay though. It's an easy class. . . I don't need to ask questions

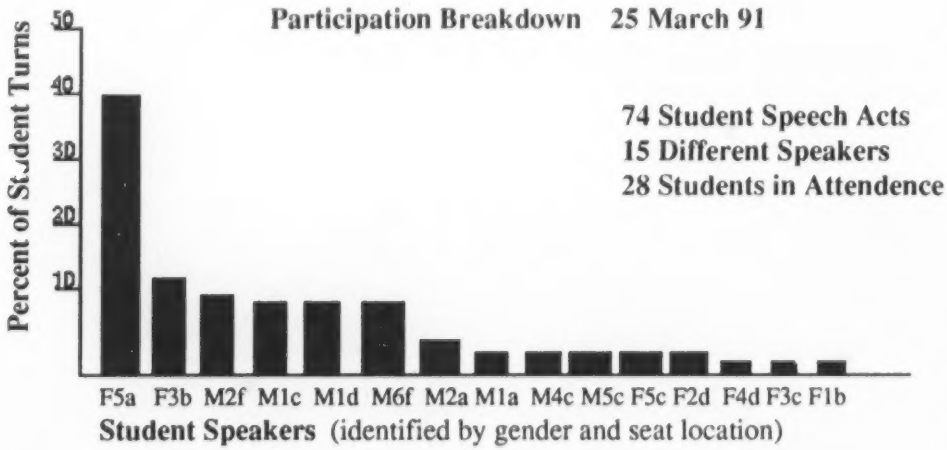
Instructor Actions and Attitudes

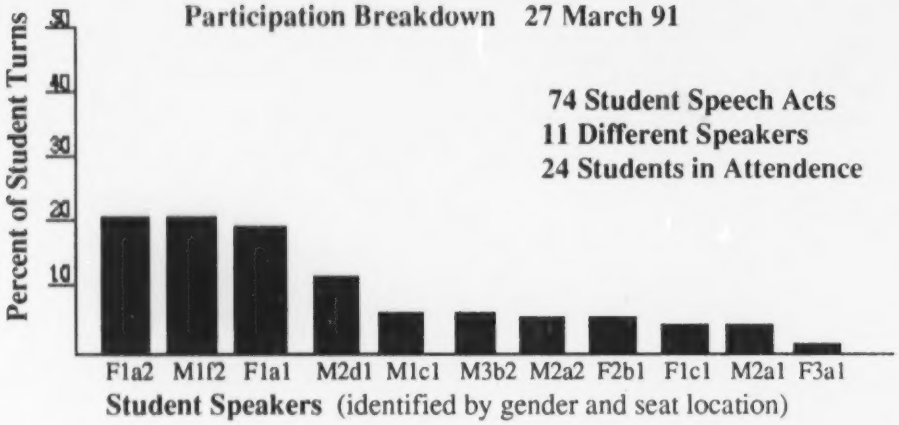
In "Classroom Discourse," Courtney Cazden stated "One paradox of the question-answer sequence is that pupil answers are essential for the progress of the lesson, yet the answer expected by the teacher is rarely obvious" (440).

In the class studied, the professor did various things to facilitate student participation. When asking questions, she would frequently ask two questions in direct succession. Often, the first question in the pair would be general and the second one would serve to focus student thinking. For example: "So, you've got universities and you've got education, Why is that important? What does education buy you?" and "Where did it originate? What language?" Mary's use of this double question technique, which narrowed the range of probable answers, helped to lessen the paradox as identified by Cazden.

Mary also used a number of non-verbal cues for participation that the students were familiar with. Facing the class (as opposed to writing on the black board) and making eye contact were body movements that two of the four students interviewed identified as a cue to speak. Mary was aware that students wanted her looking at them when they spoke as evidenced by the time she asked a question and still had a word or two to write on the blackboard—"Just a minute and I'll turn around so you can answer." In addition, Mary frequently would move toward the class when she wanted input. She seemed to be aware that students needed non-verbal cues for participation and these were provided.

In the class studied, there were many opportunities for student speech. However, there was a core of five to six students who seemed to monopolize the participation opportunities. As the term progressed, a participation pattern emerged where Mary would have extended interactions with one student. In addition, the same few people chose to participate in these interactions. The following are breakdowns of student speech acts from the two classes with the highest number of student responses.


Participation Breakdown 25 March 91
74 Student Speech Acts
15 Different Speakers
28 Students in Attendence
Percent of Student Turns
50
40
30
20
10
F5a F3b M2f M1c M1d M6f M2a M1a M4c M5c F5c F2d F4d F3c F1b
Student Speakers (identified by gender and seat location)



In the first case, a little over half of the students present spoke, in the second one, a little less than half. However, in both cases, the responses of four to six students accounted for seventy to eighty percent of all student speech acts. What could account for the decision on the part of the majority of student not to take advantage of the myriad of opportunities to speak in class? Student actions and attitudes, as reflected in the interviews and observed in the classroom, can offer insights into this question.

Shultz, Erickson, and Florio's assertion that "there seems to be a general set of standards for how to act in school" (91) was true for the students interviewed. These students identified four primary rules for participation:

- Don't ask stupid questions. [Stupid questions were defined as those with obvious answers or with answers students should be able to find themselves].
- Don't waste the teacher's time.
- Don't waste class time.
- Try to find your own answers before asking the teacher.

These rules seem to indicate a student- assumed hierarchy of knowledge, with the teacher at the top and the students at the bottom. It seemed to be generally accepted that the teacher was the person with the most knowledge and therefore should be the one to do the majority of the speaking. This assumption may have been reinforced by the nature of the course itself, which encouraged more of a focus on 'information passing' on the part of the teacher and with

less room for student interpretation. Students seemed concerned that they needed to be knowledgeable in order to speak and that their speech acts should reflect a certain level of intellectual competence. These rules, as defined by the interviewees and acted upon by the class at large, are undoubtedly oversimplification of larger issues at work in the classroom but because students identified them as part of the structure determining in-class speech, they should be considered.

The following are three excerpts from student interviews that reflect their views on participation:

Carl	A lot of it is just getting over the nervousness of embarrassing myself by saying something totally wrong and stupid.
Interviewer	So, why don't some people talk?
Carl	Fear of sounding dumb, at least for me anyway.

Interviewer	So, why do you think you don't speak up very much?
Allicia	I don't think I have anything to say, to give input. I mean, you have to know what you are saying.

Interviewer	Why do you think you participate more now that you are a Senior?
Dan	I just feel more comfortable. I mean statistically there is a greater possibility that my answer might be the right one.
Interviewer	So you want to get the right answer?
Dan	Well, yeah I mean you never want to look stupid. I mean, they say there is no stupid question or stupid answer, and maybe not, but there some that are pretty dumb.

The fear of embarrassment is a genuine obstacle to student participation and appears to override any perceived benefit of speaking in class. With this kind of barrier, teachers must work extra hard to make their classrooms a comfortable place for students to speak. Mary certainly did this; her questioning tech-

niques allowed for high success in answering and she gave verbal cues when to participate. Yet, on the best day, only half the class choose to speak and some students never said a word during the fifteen class sessions observed.

The students interviewed all said they did not want to waste class time by speaking in class. They implied that the teacher, being the one with the most knowledge, should do the majority, if not all the speaking in the classroom. This view of classroom dynamics is undoubtable influenced by the models encountered by students at MTU. The university often is viewed as engineering college and many of the science and math courses are structured on the consumer model where the professors' job is to dispense information and the students' job is to absorb it. This 'banking concept' of education as Paulo Friere calls it, is one that the students at Michigan Tech are familiar and comfortable with and this fact undoubtedly contributes to student opinion that the teacher should do most of the speaking in the classroom .

The underlying assumption of this study was that student participation is important. Teachers advocate participation as a heuristic for exploring knowledge and encouraging critical thinking. This ideal view is challenged by student perceptions that: only those with the most knowledge should speak, class participation wastes valuable class time and student speech provides minimal learning opportunities. Furthermore, student fears of looking stupid further impedes their speech participation This study has shown that while one teacher actively encouraged participation, many students in her classroom declined to speak.

Further Research

While many educators strive for student-owned classrooms, they fail to understand student perceptions and do not communicate their pedagogical rationale to the students. Thus, a serious gap exists between student and teacher perceptions. Consequently, continued research must address four important questions: What expectations do student have for verbal participation in the classroom ? What are the common student perceptions of the dynamics of in-class speech? What structures underlie the oversimplified tacit rules for in-class speech as identified by students in this study? and What strategies can be used to minimize the difference between student and teacher perceptions of in-class speech?

Clearly, students have ideas about class participation and these need to be acknowledged. However, as teachers are we then expected to accept student

perceptions as valid and to change our teaching techniques to those that students see as comfortable and beneficial. I think not. As educators, we undoubtable know a great deal about pedagogical techniques. We can and do give strong arguments about the value of in-class student speech and these are arguments that our students need to hear. In short, students need to be engaged in critical inquiry concerning not only the content of courses, but the very manner in which that content is presented to them.

In order to lessen the gap between student and teacher ideas and actions concerning in- class speech, I recommend that instructors reserve time, at the beginning of each term and at regular intervals throughout the course to do the following: explain the rational behind teaching strategies that encourage student speech, discuss the benefits and the drawbacks of various learning strategies, and challenge the prevalent student view that the teacher is the primary, and perhaps the sole possessor, of knowledge in the classroom. Engaging students in this manner will help to bring the issues surrounding student speech to the forefront and could help both teachers and students begin developing a common agenda concerning the role and the value of student participation.

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